Review

Reviewed Work(s): A BAND OF PROPHETS: THE VANDERBILT AGRARIANS AFTER FIFTY YEARS by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan

Review by: Peter J. Stanlis

Source: *Christianity and Literature* , FALL 1984, Vol. 34, No. 1

(FALL 1984), pp. 64-66

A BAND OF PROPHETS: THE VANDERBILT AGRARIANS AFTER FIFTY YEARS. Edited by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982. Pp. x + 190. $12.95.

Reviewed by Peter J. Stanlis, Rockford College

On August 7, 1962, at Bread Loaf, Vermont, Donald Davidson gave me an inscribed copy of *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). Between 1939 and 1944, as a student at Bread Loaf, I had occasionally discussed with Davidson, and John Crowe Ransom, and once with Allen Tate, many of the literary, political, and economic principles set forth in *I'll Take My Stand.* I agreed with their central thesis that as American society, both rural and urban, became more and more dominated by practical applied science, in industry, commerce, finance, education, politics, and indeed every aspect of our culture, including even art and religion, that *I'll Take My Stand* would take on increasing significance as a valid critique of modern American industrialized society. The normative principles of their critique were derived from the conception of man and society set forth in the ancient Classical pastoral tradition and in orthodox Christianity and feudalism throughout European civilization, as these were embodied in the agrarian South. Since *A Band of Prophets* is a retrospective sequel to *I'll Take My Stand,* a summary of the thesis of the earlier book is a necessary prelude to understanding the later volume.

The central metaphor of *I'll Take My Stand*,—agrarianism versus industrialism—provided the basis for understanding the two dominant conflicting philosophies of life regarding modern civilization. The twelve Southerners who contributed essays to this book—Ransom, Tate, Davidson, John Gould Fletcher, Frank Owsley, Lyle H. Lanier, Herman C. Nixon, Andrew N. Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, John D. Wade, Henry B. Kline, and Stark Young—were keenly aware that no absolute or abstract antithesis existed between the agrarian and industrial philosophies of life. Like Robert Frost they believed that rural and urban life should balance and supplement each other and thus create a harmony within individuals and in society. They strongly favored the agrarian way of life, both in itself and because it provided a needed corrective to the terrible imbalance created by the growing dominance of urban industrialized society. The agrarians did not think in abstract categories, but unfortunately many of their Yankee and Southern critics did, so that they were badly misunderstood and were dismissed as defenders of the antebellum South.

The enormous differences in culture and civility between an agrarian and an industrial society are indicated in the introduction to *A Band of Prophets*. The editors note that all of the contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* "had in common a stringent critical attitude toward the trend in American society away from humane values in the direction of a technocratic, urban-industrial society organized on a mass basis around a cash nexus, producer-consumer relation." Their book was "not a nostalgic book looking back but a prophetic book on future conditions of American society." As Robert Penn Warren put it, looking back at their fifty-year prophecy, the agrarians had asked perhaps the most vital question facing mankind: "What is the effect of the world of technology on man?" (p. 183). The effect can be measured in part by contrasting the cultures of rural and industrialized urban society.

The values inherent in the agrarian culture were based upon traditional Classical philosophy and the religious orthodoxies of the Judeo-Christian tradition, embodied and personalized in local community life. The agrarians rejected the private rationalism of Deists and free-thinkers in religion and morality as destructive of man's social nature and leading to moral nihilism and decadence. In education the agrarians championed the liberal arts and humanities, rather than science-oriented technical training or utilitarian and pragmatic occupational programs. In politics they believed in the sovereignty of local, regional, and state self-government, based upon both population and territory, a constitutional-minded brand of democratic conservatism which feared and despised centralized power in a national state. They fostered personal control of political power and rejected the impersonal rule of remote bureaucratic government with its abstract alphabetical agencies. In economics the agrarians favored the yeoman values of feudal England, the self-reliant individualism of free farmers in a largely autonomous local or regional rural economy. Therefore, they rejected the factory system, whether capitalistic or socialistic, because it exalted machines at the expense of humane values, treated human nature and labor as a mere commodity, created a rootless proletariat which was victimized by periodic unemployment through overproduction and inequities in the distribution of wealth. The factory system also exploited nature for quick profits, created air and water pollution, and produced acquisitive avarice in credit banking and the

refinement of desires for luxuries through advertising.

In the arts and literature the agrarians revered the classics, English and American literature, folk art and balladry, etc., as fulfilling the aesthetic sensibility in human nature. They were highly critical of the cultural horrors of Hollywood, which reduced art to a vulgar mechanical entertainment; and they had no use for modern journalism, which also fostered a popular culture of aimless flux. In intellectual history the agrarians rejected the ideological theory that science and time were redemptive gods serving mankind and that therefore history contained an inherent law of inevitable evolutionary "progress" in human affairs through a mastery over physical nature. In summary, the moral, intellectual, social, and aesthetic virtues championed by the agrarians functioned within the leisurely paced art of living symbolized by the South, dominated by a system of manners, at once aristocratic and democratic, personal and hospitable, hierarchical and free, chivalrous and humane. In its values and spirit the agrarian world represented in every way the antithesis of the modern industrial world, the science-dominated, materialistic, abstract, technological, dehumanized, hedonistic, frenzy-paced culture of the megalopolis, with its ghettos of poverty, its exploitation of human beings through crime, drugs, sex, and revolutionary Utopian ideology.

Even more than the six writers who contributed essays and commentaries on *I'll Take My Stand*—Charles P. Roland, John S. Reed, Louis P. Simpson, Robert B. Heilman, George Core, and Louis D. Rubin, Jr.—the three surviving original contributors—Lyle Lanier, Andrew Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren, who discussed the essays presented in *A Band of Prophets*, agreed that the dire prophecies of fifty years ago have been essentially fulfilled. The culture of modern industrialism, based upon science, materialism, and centralized government, has systematically weakened, corrupted, or destroyed the humane values defended in *I'll Take My Stand*.